

Defining and Deconstructing Gender Roles through Thematic Elements in Dystopic Feminist
Young Adult Literature

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation

with research distinction in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

By

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2014

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“In order to help students appreciate the impact of gender on social relationships and social structure, it is useful to have them consider different conceptions of gender. One way to do this is by exposing them to science fiction about worlds in which gender is constructed very differently.” (Lips, 1990)

This critical analysis of literature focuses on futuristic dystopian societies through the lens of feminism analyzing how female characters behave and interact with their environment in order to draw conclusions about how their behavior challenges or upholds certain aspects of gender roles in society; furthermore, this study examines what these behaviors mean or if they are correlated to other aspects of society. The idea of studying gender in literature is a topic that has expanded over the years. Studying gender in literature has focused a more powerful lens on gender dynamics and how characters, especially female ones, are written into stories. This critical thematic analysis focuses on a distinctly feminist perspective of dystopic-futuristic novels and how this genre holds up to a thematic, feminist analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). This study will build upon work already established and analyze a set of books for codes and themes that enhance an understanding of female roles in society.

According to Hilary M. Lips (1990), “We are seldom aware of how our own gender and the very concept of gender shapes our lives. It is difficult to take issue with Bem and Bem’s (1970) argument that gender is in many ways a ‘nonconscious ideology’” (p. 197). Feminist study of science fiction has expanded greatly and has simultaneously become increasingly complex and murky due to its incredible popularity with the masses. This study and others show a strong connection between science fiction and the idea that a female can break out of stereotypical female roles and draws attention to what Lips (1990) calls “the pervasiveness with which gender is used in our society to frame expectations about individuals and their behavior” (p. 197) and how the family structure affects the social life and relationships between men and

women. I take this idea a step further by analyzing what these depictions of females in dystopian science fictions mean to gender roles and show that these roles can be analyzed and are conscious challenges to traditionally held female roles. The world of science fiction is ripe with new roles for women because it presents great opportunity to reevaluate the roles of women. The study examines the roles of females within these novels and how these feminist writers create a world in which females are able to break stereotypes and traditional roles of females in literature.

Literature and media have power. They are a precursor to societal reality and emphasis. The novels in this study, like all other novels, have the power to subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, introduce new ideas. These new ideas, if fostered in the media, will become major rhetorical tools within society. These novels may continue on to become translated into other sources of societal communication such as television, comics, sequels, or conversation. Novels have for some time shaped society and opened up opportunities for deeper conversation, not just about gender equality, but about various societal issues. Literature presents an idea which implicitly implies possibility. I would argue that literature is imagination that very well may be a precursor to new understandings and perhaps new realities—especially regarding gender roles in society.

The Social Nature of Gender Construction

There are differences between gender and sex; gender is a socially constructed way to define what it means to be male and female while sex is biological. Gender roles are largely created by society: dress, appearance, and speech patterns. Females are expected to fulfill certain social expectations and behavioral patterns as are males. The idea that biology determines the differences between men and women is often accepted by society. The idea of being female or

male “reflect[s] a naturalistic conceptualization of gender that is prevalent in many natural sciences,” that encourages or creates inequality and, when “left unchallenged... may reify and actually legitimize gender inequality” (Odhiambo, 2012, p. 25). These ideas of social gender construction are not limited to society but manifest themselves in society via the various mediums such as books, comics, and television. Elements of gender role creation are not limited to literature but are subjective to society’s foci, and this is part of the social construction of gender roles in society (Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos, & Walkerdine, 2008).

It is evident that in society differences are maintained through expectation. This is not limited to gender; gender is the most interesting and studied of social norms. The reason for this fascination is more than likely because gender is one of the most complex and prevalent phenomena to the human existence. This idea of prevalence of gender in society is because the construction of gender is also maintained by a manipulation of communication and silence between genders and continued cultural practices and expectations within our society. The individual is constantly subject to gender rhetoric—implicit and explicit. Construction of gender is so prevalent in society, and “gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life” (Lorber, 1994, p. 54). Gender almost goes unnoticed to a majority of the populace until someone disrupts it (Lorber, 1994).

Society continues to construct and expect certain behaviors that have become routine. In the US, women are perceived as being more likely to express emotions (Skolnick, Bascom, & Wilson, 2013, p. 72). Women are told how to act, not just by other women and family institutions but by “parents, peers, social institutions, and the mass media [that] foster cooperation and emotional support among girls, whereas boys are led to be more competitive,

independent, and aggressive” (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012, p. 520). These expectations in society work as the expectation and simultaneously are the reason that “these stereotypical beliefs about gender form a cultural frame through which people come to understand themselves and others, which then shapes how people behave in particular relational contexts” (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012, p. 520). Women are expected to be nurturers based on their biological make-up, and these things and ideas persist through life. Studies show that “the influence of cultural stereotyping and the social construction of gender persists throughout life, and messages that encourage warmth and nurturance on the part of women do not end with childhood” (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012, p. 520). Gender is very real, and its creation relies on a basic formula of reinforcement and belief systems being perpetuated by the intuitions that persist in society. These studies continually come to the conclusion that these gendering ideas survive because society allows them to either by the desired continuance that these gendering habits continue or habitual unawareness and acceptance.

Defining Young Adult Literature

“The term young adult does not have a firm definition that suits everyone. The term itself connotes other terms, such as ‘puberty’, ‘adolescence’, and ‘teenager’, and these terms, too, suggest different things to different people.” (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2007, p. 4).

Young adult literature is meant as a form of entertainment for a *young adult* audience. But there is this issue of *what exactly constitutes a young adult, anyway?* Michael Cart (2010) says:

There is ready and well-nigh universal agreement among experts that something called

young adult literature is—like the Broadway musical, jazz, and the foot-long hotdog---an American gift to the world. But the happy concurrence ends when you then ask those experts to explain *precisely* what young adult literature is, because doing so is about as easy as nailing Jell-O to a wall. (p. 3)

Even though it is difficult to keep the definition of young adult literature constant, largely due to the fact that it is defined by its audience, it is important to define it for this analysis.

Roxburgh (2004) talks about the oddity that the young adult genre is, by the very fact that it is defined by its age group. As Stephen Roxburgh (2004) aptly states:

Most observations about the subject matter and the age of the protagonist and the point of view from which a story is told only describe the young adult novel; they do not define it. I think we need to move past these discussions, not because they are wrong, but because they don't get us anywhere we haven't already been. We need to move the discussion from superficial to essential aspects of the art of the young adult novel. There is no difference between the young adult novel and the adult novel. (p. 4)

Young adult literature is a group of books that seeks to define the trials and tribulations of growing up and challenge and promote different paths of life. This is applicable to all literature. Even though Roxburgh makes a good point, instead of just describing what the young adult novel is by its point of view or by subject matter, we will use the key themes and aspects of young adult literature that have remained constant since the conception of the genre.

In other words, the *themes* and *codes* remain fairly constant, but the way in which the author addresses these things may look drastically different from book to book within the young adult literature genre. According to Stephens (2007) and Tomlinson (2007), in a young adult

novel, the story often focuses on a teenager or a group of teenagers with the adults absent or as sub-characters. Indeed, while adults may be major players in the story, it is the adolescent the audience is supposed to predominantly sympathize with. When reading young adult literature written in first person narratives, we rely on the main character's thoughts to dictate our knowledge of the story. Also, the protagonist's choices and actions are the major forces that drive the plot of the story. The obstacles and themes in the plot reflect those experienced by young adults. The characters often experience obstacles that are representative of real-world problems that everyday young adults deal with. The dialogue reflects younger people's way of speaking. The voice is distinctly a teen voice and focuses on desires that are youthful in nature. The point of view is that of an adolescent and reflects an adolescent's interpretation of events and people; in other words, the adolescent's point of view is the most important, and the adolescent is still discovering how to relate to their world. The themes and issues in young adult novels address the developmental concerns of teenagers. The journey toward identity is a common theme in young adult literature. The same elements that mark literary value in adult literature are present in young adult literature. With these specific criteria, it is safe to say that the characters in these books are supposed to be younger and on a journey with specific requirements (Tomlinson, 2007; Stephens 2007).

Still, it seems that these types of books that are read by young adults are not just changing because of the adult authors that write them but because our young adult audience is being drawn to these contemporary novels. Since the definition of young adult literature relies on the readership, by its most basic definition, it is safe to say that since that readership is always changing and growing what makes up relevant young adult literature is always changing by virtue of the fact that what the previous generations may have appreciated the next may not. As

far as the scholars conclude, it really has no clear definition, except that its target audience is the reading youth; therefore, we must conclude that it is not the literature itself that lends to a definition of ‘young adult’ but the idea of what messages the authors are postulating as ‘young adult messages’, and what novels are actually being read by the youth further dictates what becomes ‘important’, or relevant ‘young adult’ literature. If a certain theme, i.e. fantasy and magic like in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or Susan Collins’ *Hunger Games* with the theme of dystopia, catches on with the young adult crowd—that is perhaps the best indicator of relevant young adult literature and literature that is clearly defined as ‘young adult’. Since the definition is defined by its audience, then the audience is what best defines what makes up the genre and further what makes up *relevant* young adult literature.

So, the definition of young adult literature is only that we know that the target audience is young adults. We know that these books are meant to speak to the youth of our culture. The fact that this subset is defined by the audience it seeks is more important than actually defining what “makes it” young adult literature. While reading the concepts and different stories in these books we should be thinking: why is this being targeted towards the youth of our generation, or what does this say about the youth of the current generation, rather than asking what makes this ‘young adult’? Essentially, young adult literature is what our youth sees as relevant to their lives; this ties into the idea of the constant themes and ideas that remain in young adult literature as they are defined by Stephens (2007) and Tomlinson (2007) and in this study.

When dealing with feminism in this study, I apply the definition of a feminist children’s novel to these books and media. A feminist novel is a book where we can clearly see females who develop and act with agency in their worlds. The feminist novel is defined as a novel where women are vocal, have agency, and show themselves to be more than female, more than sex

appeal, to be present as human beings (Trites, 1997). This is not to say that feminist novels are just for the ladies. As Trites (1997) says, “Some of the most poignant feminist children’s narratives are those which recognize that traditional gender roles have been as limiting for boys as they have for girls” (p. 5). The books that gain status as a feminist novel should only be against the “passive female, the silent female, the objectified female, that the feminist protagonist’s achievements can be fully understood” (Trites, 1997, p. 6). The novels I study in this research analysis will serve as a “counterbalance” to “literary proclamations of female subjectivity”. (Trites, 1997, pp. x-xi). What makes a piece of literature feminist is its ability to challenge stereotypes by crafting new gender roles in such a way that it does not completely destroy the reality of gender identity and how women fit into society.

The Implications of Gender in Literature Mediums

This study engages with the implications of science fiction in literature as a great equalizer when looking at gender roles in society, especially regarding the roles of women in particular. Lips (1990) has looked at science fiction “as stimuli for helping students notice and perhaps break free of their unacknowledged assumptions about people and behavior...works of science fiction can be extremely useful” (p. 198). In other words, science fiction has proven itself as a great tool for analyzing, studying, and re-thinking gender roles as we understand them in contemporary society. Ursula K. Le Guin is an example of an author who, “since the late 1960s, has challenged numerous conventions of science fiction in her novels, depicting characters who redefine our understandings of gender and race and creating plots with clear political subtexts” (Rashley, 2007, p. 22). As Pam Gilbert has found, “it is through fictions or stories that our understanding of gender is constantly made and remade and acquires factual status” (Gilbert, 1994, p. 134). Today, with social media, constant access to the written word, and the incredible

popularity of the young adult novel, more than ever, this is applicable to literature studies.

It is not just through the study of literature that one can make conclusions and exclusions on gender understanding since gender differences in stories are evident and are also used to create the realities of real world gender differences (Gilbert, 1994). In other words, even though female and male roles in literature are created in the fictional universe, they have implications in the real world through their readers. Gilbert (1994) maintains that gender in story transcends, establishes, and reinforces real world gender roles. According to Dyson & Genishi (1994):

The storytelling self is a social self, who declares and shapes important relationships through the mediating power of words. Thus, in sharing stories, we have the potential for forging new relationships, including local, classroom "cultures" in which individuals are interconnected and new "we's" formed. (p. 14)

Today, with social media, constant access to the written word, and the incredible popularity of young adult novel, more than ever this is true. As Gilbert goes on to say, “within cultures which divide people into groups dependent upon their biological sex, ... issues of gender are inevitably involved in storying”, or how a culture communicates the gender norms. Further:

what comes to count as appropriate social practice for a “girl” or a “boy” a “woman” or a “man” becomes part of a culture’s stories—bedtime stories, TV stories, movie stories, or advertisement stories; stories that are written spoken, enacted, or constructed with visual images.... (Gilbert, 1994, p. 130)

Thus, studies solidify the idea of gendering en masse for media politics and literature. From the idea of how women should behave, look, and where they belong in society is established through storying and gender play in fantasy.

Literature is complex and influential, words have power, and discovering what themes and issues are apparent within this set of feminist books has led to many different observations of these females and their stories. Since “story provides a substantial and detailed manifestation of culture, it is through story that children can learn the patterns of desire appropriate to their gender” (Davies, 1993, p. 145). This study has also led to an observation that there is a substantial amount of overlap in what drives female protagonists. The differences are also very revealing. The gender of our hero, in this case female, really drives the direction of the story. It dictates how the story is built and created. These books are foremost studied in this research for what it means to rise above female stereotypes. Gender roles in the selected novels are not based purely on masculinity and femininity. Rather, they are more aptly based on roles of individuality. The idea of heavily gendering characters to be exclusively submissive (feminine) or exclusively oppressive (masculine) creates an overwhelming generalization of the sexes. In other words, in a feminist novel, characters are “empowered regardless of gender” (Trites R. S., 1997, p. 4). The idea of a female character acting out of necessity and within reason of her abilities and character has the opportunity to not only challenge gender stereotypes but to reestablish individuality as the force behind personality development—and not gender. Certainly, these novels represent society’s developing thoughts on the moral, philosophical, and heroic role of women in societies.

The complexity of gender construction in these novels is often communicated through morality and the idea of oppression as evil; especially regarding females. These novels aptly explore the philosophy of gender and oppression in many different forms enacted by family, institutions, or societal ignorance and how gender rules and expectations relate to a society’s morality and may even take the form of law; this idea is exemplified most clearly in *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011). These two ideas are almost completely intertwined because philosophy is

how we as individuals and as a race make sense of our world. Philosophy through storytelling is how we communicate morality, or what we may accept as truth, and that is what a book can most aptly be defined as. The novel is most aptly defined as an artifact of philosophy almost as much as it is a device for storytelling. Colin McGinn (1999) talks about the two types of philosophical modes in which morality is communicated through the “the ‘commandment’ paradigm and the ‘parable’ paradigm” (p. 2). Essentially, McGinn (1999) supports the idea of fiction or the ‘parable’ paradigm as the more effective mode for morality to be communicated than the ‘commandment’ paradigm, and he has argued:

[the parable], as exemplified in fictional narrative, with its appeal to our aesthetic sensibility, is the true vehicle of moral thought and persuasion. The fictional world is ideal for the exploration of ethical questions and the acquisition of ethical knowledge (np).

McGinn (1999) also stipulates:

I am not, of course, saying that this is *all* that literary art does—just that it is an important part of it. In fact, I think that the role of morality in fiction has been underestimated in recent years, mainly because of the relativism and formalism that afflict so much of contemporary literary studies. I would say that it is simply not possible to discuss literature adequately without seriously taking on the ethical dimensions of the text (p. 8).

Thusly, the idea of gender in literature can be understood as a vehicle for ethical change, especially regarding the stereotypical and expected gender roles of women. Female roles in their stories communicate their proper roles or imagined roles in society, a possible precursor to

societal norms for females.

The novel, in young adult literature, uses the experiences of its characters to communicate a philosophical view of the world. For example, often the protagonist finds themselves in a tragedy much like most heroic tales; the hero is formed from loss and adversity. The adversity in the novel is often created by a battle between good and evil, thus the idea of morality and a literal battle of these philosophies is established as a common focal point. The clear purpose of a novel is to prove the philosophy that is superior by pitting that philosophy against the 'enemy philosophy'. Female protagonists are exceptional in this selection of books because they overcome great adversity through social control, oppression and chaos, and they also bring concerns to the table that are predominately female concerns. These stories show the advancement in female heroism in our literature and rise above or challenge female stereotypes. It is not just about females being the main character but the fact that the foci of these characters is explicitly feminine which lends itself to a world of challenges and a great deal of realism. These females rise above a long-held stereotype of women as the focus of rescue. These females tell stories that rewrite the idea of gender in various societies, and they are clearly moral devices with a message that surely constitutes a "triumphal literature," because they overcome societal oppression and go on a journey of "a search for identity" which interconnects to the message of right and wrong for the female protagonist (Trites R. S., 1997, pp. 2-3).

Study Methodology

Futuristic dystopian fiction has been selected for this particular study. The goal of this study is to explore how women in futuristic dystopian literature uphold and challenge societal gender stereotypes. The study will use a content analysis which "as a researchers' technique,

content analysis provides new insights, increases a researchers' understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions. Content analysis is a scientific tool" (Krippendorff, 2004). In particular, this study will use a critical thematic analysis which "connotes the analysis of story like verbal material and the use of relatively comprehensive units of analysis" (Krippendorff, 2004). This analysis may also use, motifs (Thompson, 1932), imagery, and thoughts. Futuristic dystopian literature especially have been analyzed in this study and discovered to reflect both issues within contemporary society and imaginations of how females can achieve agency and roles of leadership. For this study, the scope has been limited to a group of fifteen books chosen by the Amelia Bloomer Project (Amelia Bloomer Project, 2014) which exemplify:

1. Significant feminist content
2. Excellence in writing
3. Appealing format
4. Age appropriateness for young readers

A summary of each of these novels can be found in Appendix A (Project, 1996-2014). I have analyzed and discussed this selection of books for thematic elements in order to come up with conclusions about the set based on similarities and differences. This analysis will help to identify the coders that have become habitual in this genre which speak to what drives females in dystopian literature and perhaps even conclude why (Neuendorf, 2002). By analyzing differences, I discovered how females rose above certain tropes, or themes, and what this means for furthering the study of gender in literature. Contrast and comparison between novels is an effective tool in order to bring even more awareness to what exactly makes that different. There

is a large pool of research for gender studies, and these studies have concluded often that “generally, the findings [studying literature and a variety of media forms] have confirm[ed] a message environment of androcentrism (i.e., with males heavily overrepresented in sheer numbers and routinely given more important roles) (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 202). This being said, the novels chosen for this study have already been certified as feminist and focus mainly on female protagonists and female roles.

Of course differences will be situational, and within this text set, an extensive chart system has been used to track these themes and seek to show where females are presented as not participating in “sex stereotyping (i.e. with significant and often predictable differences between male and female characterizations)” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 202). This analysis is meant to be as objective as possible, and “the issue ...is that great caution and self-awareness must be exercised by the researcher in conducting qualitative data analysis, for the analysis and the findings may say more about the researcher than about the data” (Cohen, Manion, & Keith, 2011). Obviously, personal observations and theories will come in to play in this study, but measures have been taken in order to support these observations empirically and to initiate and deeply consider implications of female roles in these texts. This study aims to maintain thematic content analysis as it pertains to the subject and may say as much about the subject as it says about the researcher.

This thematic analysis examines tropes—tropes in this instance can be an overused idea or just a common occurrence in the book set and other media that denotes meaning for feminism, young adults, or both—from the selected group of books. This study will use the thematic analysis theory and chart system to track, analyze, and draw conclusions using the similarities and dissimilarities between these novels or “artifacts”. Connections made between these artifacts will strengthen the validity of this analysis. The thematic content analysis will seek to

objectively identify what behaviors and attitudes women consistently portray in futuristic dystopian literature that uphold stereotypes or break the mold of the established feminine language of literature. Not all of these themes could be analyzed within this study, but a select few have been chosen to exemplify the chosen focus of this analysis. The chart for the analyzed themes can be found in Appendix B. We began with many themes and analyzed them using other studies and comparative analysis focusing primarily on themes that are relevant to this studies' thesis. These themes are:

1. Loss: (Death or Absence of Father, Agency/Identity)

Loss was a theme that had a strong presence in these novels. The idea of loss was so prevalent in the dystopian futuristic feminist set that it was almost a necessity to limit this study to two major aspects of loss: the Loss/Death or Absence of the Father and the Loss of Agency/identity.

2. Relationships: (Love Interest, Loner)

Relationships were established and old gender codes were omitted which developed the feminist aspect further regarding the idea of the love interest. The beginnings of female characters setting out on their own was observed as well. Again, this theme was reduced to only analyzing two major aspects the Love Interest and the Loner.

3. Institutions: (Social Order/Control)

This was by far the most elaborate and complex of the themes in these books. Because the idea of dystopia must form a way to disrupt order the schemes and social order systems were disrupted greatly. This idea of disrupting society via governmental control or imposed social order created a world in which dystopia would create opportunities and conditions that would lend to gender deconstruction.

4. Feminine Expectations: (Appearance)

Feminine expectations were so implicit in these novels but overturned in many cases because of necessity. It is hard to maintain vanity when survival is on the line. Also women in these novels are not beauties in need of being rescued but resourceful female characters with a story of their own. This theme broke the most stereotypes by omitting the femme fatale and the idea of the female character in need of rescue, but did not challenge the idea of feminine beauty being essential to the female character's identity. Stereotypical beauty is still upheld as an integral part of the female form in this book set.

Implications of Dystopia Regarding the Female Protagonist

The importance of establishing gender expectations are still evident and should be challenged when there is a socially constructed inequality. This is why exploring and breaking down female gender roles and how females deal with these different roles in literature is part of the introduction and exploration of putting women closer to the freedom to fulfill their potential. Imagination begins the conception of new things or can be a precursor to reality. It is conceivable that literature is beginning to explore more fleshed-out gender dynamics as a precursor to understanding the gender psyche more thoroughly. Literature is complex and influential, but discovering what themes are apparent between the set of books has led to a realization that there is a substantial amount of overlap in what drives female protagonists. Female protagonists especially learn to deal with the loss of family by discovering voice and agency within the book. Further, the female protagonist pushes the boundaries of what is deemed moral in her society in order to become free of the limiting expectations of society that may hold her back from achieving solidarity in her individuality. All of these aspects come together to form identity.

It is a constant recreating of the female identity that necessitates the creating of feminist media works: not just to establish female identity and voice creatively, but to challenge tropes and narrow-minded gender pigeon-holing. There were instances of omission of the male presence that did not lend itself to promoting *equality* between the sexes. In this research study I discovered that these feminist novels rose above many gendered stereotypes in which they had to fight an oppressive regime in the form of government, religion, family and societal structures. I think there is a lot more ground that needs covering in our media and literature in the realm of discovering a balanced and dynamic representation of gender. I also discovered many stereotypes and foci tend to limit what a females can accomplish, and challenging these

stereotypes is paramount for discovering the individual's potential—females especially in this case. We have many female concerns that are explored in these books, and we have a great many challenges to the social norms, made possible by the futuristic and dystopic nature of these tales. These novels are set in the future which creates an automatic desire of hope that women will indeed be able to claim agency from a history of decided neglect. The dystopic nature of these books personifies and embodies the challenges women face in society daily.

The severity of these books, aptly named “dystopian”, is paramount to developing the female voice, because by creating a clear adversary the writer creates an environment where the female voice may challenge years of negative patriarchal societies. These books also make it possible to directly engage female challenges or female struggles. Female characters need something to represent the struggle of feminism to recreate female voice and identity, therefore they need an adversary to represent these challenges. These stories give a very real account of the struggles females face in society, old ones such as female sexuality, objectification, usury, including the dark topic of rape, and contemporary ones such as abortion, career women, independent women, and fighting women.

At times, the extremity can be counter-productive because it creates situations in which the male voice is completely villainized, or stereotyped, and creates an almost completely female cast. A cast that creates a story where the female is the only focus merely creates a situation that is just as awkward as the void that we find in books absent female voices. Further, the subjugation of women often draws attention to how oppression may be equally felt by the male populace, and also how it silences or skews both sexes. These novels try to engage directly with some of the political subjects that acknowledge female concerns regarding stereotypes and everyday challenges of growing up female. This novel set engages identity and what that means

for female roles in society.

The novels use chaos to redefine the feminine gender roles in these female protagonists' societies. The chaos is a constant in all of these books because it aides in creating a new universe for females to rediscover different ways to exercise their femininity as well as their humanity. The female issues that are explored in these books set them apart from non-feminist literature and draw the line between what is feminist and what is not. This is where the seriousness can be read in these novels. This is where female-feminist protagonists are different from male counterparts. In these books, societal oppression and female issues are intertwined. Females need something substantial that shows they have grit and can compete with adversity, and all of these challenges, although fictional, also bear great relevance to the contemporary issues of women. The stories are fictional, but the challenges are real and represent the struggle of the female gender to be understood and heard. Through the stories in this set, we have females in oppressive social situations, because the reality of female issues is that they are related to femininity just like male issues are related to masculinity. Real social issues are evaluated, constructed, and deconstructed in these tales which separate oppressive behavior and actual female qualities to create females that overcome stereotypes that are more a creation of gendering that limits female roles in society and issues that may be overlooked, unexplored or that should not be left unchallenged in our daily media. Because of the vastness and richness of this study not all of these gender themes could possibly be explored but examples are themes such as:

- Beauty Standards
- Domestic Abuse
- Rape

- Race
- Motherhood
- Family Structure
- Gender Relations
- Patriarchs and Matriarchs

These media artifacts work at creating females that rise above stereotypes and create a futuristic world where female agency, voice, identity, and the definition of where females fit in their family dynamic can be altered and challenged. Regarding female gender roles in these fifteen futuristic, dystopic novels, all of these females are put in a position where the societal norms can be re-written, and this is paramount to breaking gender stereotypes for women. The more futuristic and drastic, the more freedom these females have to change their destiny and challenge gender tropes. Chaos presents opportunity for gender reconstruction in these novels. These are the mediums our youth are reading, this is the rhetoric they are digesting. Engaging in these novels is an important pursuit in order to analyze how gender is created in young adult literature and to actively explore it.

Discussion of Themes

Loss: Absence or Death of the Father Figure

The absence of parents is nothing new to young adult literature. The idea that the young adults needs to grow up and be free of parental interference is common, but in this book set there is a pattern to the removal of the father's influence, i.e. the patriarchal tradition. This has implications in the realm of female roles in the home as well as giving an opportunity for female protagonists to fill the role of protector, caregiver, and emotional guidance: roles otherwise

reserved for fathers in the stereotypical gendering of males in familial make-up and society. Although this concept of the removal of father figures is present in all of these books in some form, I will discuss the novels that most clearly exemplify this element. The death of the father is not uncommon in male protagonist literature, but for females, it has clear and different meaning to the role of the female than it does for their male counterparts. While it is more of a rite of passage for a male protagonist to lose his father, and he often is expected to fill the role of head male, the female must take a path of resistance to assuming the role of leader. Even when it seems like the female protagonist has the upper hand as far as power and ability, she must always prove herself worthy simply because she is a woman. The removal of the father figure clearly deconstructs the typical family model in order to give the female protagonists visible freedom from the typical head of the traditional family.

There is a formula for removing the father figure from the story. In this set of novels, the parental figures are removed in some way, but there is a clear connection between the father's removal and the idea of the female protagonist taking the lead of the family. The father figure may be completely removed by war and death as in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), *Girl in the Arena* (Haines, 2009), *Green Witch* (Hoffman, 2010) and the *Amethyst Road* (Spiegler, 2005); or the father figure may be made powerless by the control of social institutions like in *Fearless* (Lott, 2007), *The Secret Under my Skin* (McNaughton, 2005), *Stolen Voices* (Davidson, 2005), *Zoe's Tale* (Scalzi, 2008) and *Birthmarked* (O'Brien, 2010). Some books even went so far as to make men and the father the complete enemy of the protagonist such as *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010) and *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007). The reason authors kill off father figures or remove them completely seems to be connected to females' individuality and identity in such a way that it compliments their freedom to engage in a journey to protect or save

humanity.

It appears that the daughters can only pursue their quests with the father out of the picture, and this is completely different from the competitive role that is usually observed in male dominated literature where the male goes on a rite of passage; for females it is necessity. Especially in these novels where dystopia and chaos have often consumed these worlds, the world is in desperate need of a hero. It is also evident that in all of these novels the female protagonist must somehow silence male figures in order to gain complete individuality or agency. The removal of the father's patriarchal influence in some way is almost paramount in all of the novels—seemingly with the purpose of preventing the female protagonist from having to overcome another male obstacle to the claiming of her voice and agency.

The Girl in the Arena (Haines, 2009) begins with the death of the father figure, Tommy, since the female protagonist Lyn's father is already dead. After Tommy is killed in the arena, Lyn's mother Allison eventually commits suicide. Before Allison kills herself, Lyn is her mother's support, and Lyn otherwise fills the father figures' role. The novel *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010) begins with the female protagonist Onyesonwu expressing the loss of her adoptive father: "My life fell apart when I was sixteen. Papa died. He had such a strong heart, yet he died..." (p. 1). After his death, Onyesonwu loses control. She "knew from that moment that [she] would never again be able to fully control the fire inside [her]," and it is after that that our female protagonist, Onyesonwu, can finally set out on her quest (p. 1). Further, it is actually Onyesonwu's biological father that is the antagonist; he had raped her mother, which was how she was conceived. In *Who Fears Death* and *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007), the father figure is literally made into the ultimate enemy of our protagonist. After Onyesonwu defeats her father, she is free to rewrite the history of her world. In both of these novels, the

traditional father figure is all-powerful, and the roles of women made completely submissive by patriarchal religions; thus the fathers are made into the symbolic representation of oppression, and that is why they are ultimately defeated by these female protagonists. Onyesonwu permanently disables her father through sorcery, and Ejii must defeat her father's symbolic taint on her, and when he is killed by Jaa, Ejii is glad (*The Shadow Speaker*, 2007).

In *the Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), we see that Katniss Everdeen has witnessed the death of her father: "My father knew and he taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run" (p. 5). The death of Katniss's father has led to the emotional ruination of Katniss's mother, and Katniss had to become strong because of it: fulfilling the father's role as provider and protector. Further, before Katniss is taken away to participate in the games, she angrily orders her cowed and weak mother, "You can't clock out and leave Prim on her own. There's no me now to keep you both alive. It doesn't matter what happens... You have to promise me you'll fight through it!" (p. 35). In her mind, Katniss thinks, "My voice has risen to a shout. In it is all the anger, all the fear I felt at her abandonment" (p. 35). Out loud, Katniss is the strong figure for the family, but in her mind she is the child once again. It shows an interesting contrast to how she really feels and what she shows: something typically attributed to men. In contrast, Katniss's mother indulges in her emotions and depression at the loss of Katniss's father.

The Amethyst Road (Spiegler, 2005) also begins with the death of a father. "I had already passed through the arch of my twelfth year when my father arrived home in an army coffin, and I could still feel the hole it had torn in my heart" (p. 87). Again, we see the emotional ruination of the mother in this story as a result of the death of the father. Serena, the female protagonist, has

gone on a journey in search of her mother, and when she finds her, she is insane. Serena talks to her mother like her mother is a child: "...I lifted my hands from her wrists and took hold of her jaw, gently but firmly, so she was forced to look into my eyes. It was the way I'd seen Willow grip Zara's face in the midst of a tantrum" (p. 258).

This idea of the omission of a patriarch is further supported by the fact that none of these women in any of these novels have supportive or kind brothers. There is one brother that does not insult or attack the female protagonist, and he is mentally disabled. In *The Girl in the Arena* (Haines, 2009), Lyn's brother Thad is a special needs child, and we only know he is younger, seemingly around seven. In *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007), Ejii has stepbrothers, but they are cruel and hate her (p. 25-29, 50). In *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), Caleb, Tris's brother, betrays her when it is revealed he is working for her enemy, the Erudite, the antagonist faction of the novel.

In *Stolen Voices* (Davidson, 2005), Darin, the female protagonist's brother, is a source of competition for the female protagonist Miri, and he eventually becomes her enemy. I think it is important to note that Miri eventually wins Darin over, and Darin becomes the hero of the story. When Darin was Miri's enemy, she was the hero, and when she wins him over to her side, he becomes the hero. The story is not only an interesting concept, but it reestablishes the stereotype of male roles being dominant if they are present. This subtle reestablishment of a male character being necessary to bring order back to society because he has 'superior talent' says a lot about the role of males in this set. The fact that Darin places the female protagonist back in the subservient role, or what could be called the mediator role, is indicative of male characterization being more dominant and powerful than the female. It is evident that a son may present a complication for the female protagonist because it would be another male voice that would

interfere with her own. Perhaps it is the removal of the mother emotionally and the father or brother physically or mentally that says a lot about why and how these female protagonists can and must be strong in order to rescue their families, their societies, or in some cases free themselves. It also may say a lot about how feminism views the male and female roles in families.

Loss: Agency and Identity

The idea of finding an identity or exercising agency is a prevalent theme in all the novels in this set. In *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011), *Fearless* (Lott, 2007), *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010), *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor, 2007), and *Green Witch* (Hoffman, 2009), the authors use restrictive societies to engage in a conflict. From the beginning of our tale, we have a female protagonist put in a position of power to tell her own story. In this set of books, it is the oppressive dystopia and chaos that jettisons the females to take action against their oppressors to search for their agency and identity. In some cases women are kept perpetually in girlhood or from assuming an identity or agency. The female protagonists are often kept in a submissive state, or they have lost their agency and thus their identity. They actively resist their oppressors by acquiring their voices or by action. The main thief of female identity in these books is oppression by society followed by family, sexual assault or usury, which may take the form of rape and objectification. Society and literature have come a long way regarding agency of women, but there continues to be stereotypes, objectification, and patterns of female roles in literature. Of course, literature has over time juggled the prospect of feminist and sexist ideologies (Trites R. S., 1997). The books in this set are exceptionally full of challenges to female stereotypes due to their status as proclaimed feminist literature, and they show readers many concepts and stereotypes that the feminist literature implicitly and explicitly challenges

through the protagonists' actions and dialogue.

In *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011), we have a triple threat. The society is oppressive. Hannah's family is judgmental and oppressive, and Hannah is sexually harassed. The society has a social moral code that forbids abortion, and the law has come to support a religious code that restricts women based on their gender alone. For Hannah, these restrictive rules are especially abrasive because she herself starts to find inconsistencies in the morality and the religion. Hannah eventually falls short of the social and moral expectations by having an affair and then an abortion, which she is caught doing. The abortion is tied into her identity as a person. Hannah's decision to have an abortion, despite knowing that her family and society would disapprove, is how she first takes agency, and it is definitely a part of her journey to discovering her identity in society.

In the beginning the reader is given a detailed description of Hannah's predicament: Hannah's complete subjugation and the theft of her agency as she is put in solitary confinement. She still has her mind and her thoughts though as she thinks to herself: "Punishment was meted out in other ways; in increments of solitude, monotony and, harshest of all, self-reflection" (p. 1). She goes on to think "She vowed to present as calm and uninteresting a picture as possible, if only for her family's sake"(p. 9-10). Hannah cares about herself actively by acknowledging what the "self reflection room" means not only to herself, but to her family, as Trites (1997) stipulates female protagonists that care about others without becoming "self-effacing" is a direct result of feminist developments in stories, or female protagonists that care about other people, but themselves as well.

Hannah is a character that goes on the journey of self discovery and also actively engages

her agency or her voice. In this study, dystopian literature has given its female characters and protagonists an opportunity to reflect their sense of identity. The whole idea of agency and identity is wrapped up in the idea of moral gendering: what is a right and what is an exception. Often agency for women in society is wrapped up in moral codes and laws. *When She Woke* engages in the idea of agency through the act of abortion. While discussing the roles of women regarding motherhood and agency, i.e. choice, we have distinct acknowledgement in this book that postulates women are not stereotypically drawn to save their child at all costs. Hannah is not bound to her motherhood or the idea of family, and taking agency in having the abortion shows the reader that.

Hannah's sister Becca, on the other hand, is the antithesis of Hannah's character development. Becca is the cowed wife, doomed to be involved with an abusive husband. Becca's husband, Cole, treats Becca like a child and puts her in the position of complete subjugation. There is a scene where Hannah goes back home and finds Becca, and then Cole comes raging in and his "eyes raked over [Hannah] contemptuously, and then he turned his attention to Becca.

"What'd I say about your sister huh? What did I say?"

"That she wasn't welcome here" Becca stammered.

"Was there any part of that you didn't understand?"

"No Cole." (p. 157)

This scene goes on and we find out that Cole is part of a terrorist group that kills chromes. Becca and the other women at The Straight Path are made to act like children. Becca is physically and emotionally abused, and the women at the Straight Path are verbally and

emotionally abused. These women are oppressed and treated like children. Hannah herself rises above these treatments and maintains her agency and her will; she is unwilling to give in to the definitions forced upon her. Becca could be seen as the representation of the beaten woman, the woman who has lost the battle to maintain her agency and identity. Becca is starkly contrasted with the mentally intact Hannah. The theft of identity and agency as fully realized for Becca, is a good counterweight to the gains that Hannah has with agency and identity by escaping the oppressive society.

In Hannah's world, categories are created and boxes are built for everyone. The people who are chromed are called "chromes," and they are separated from society and are deemed inferior to those who are not chromed. This could be seen as a parallel to feminine classifications. People often classify people certain ways based on gender. Eventually, Hannah discovers and engages her own voice and reclaims her identity by the end of her tale when "She woke and she was herself" (p. 341). Despite the oppressive society, her family, and those around her trying to decide who she is, Hannah ultimately chooses to define herself on her own terms. A refreshing aspect of this novel is that Hannah does not rely on her family to define her. A common aspect of acceptance in novels for females is that they find redemption through family.

In *Fearless* (Lott, 2007), categorizing by names and separating by classes is a way to steal the identity of the protagonist. In *Fearless*, there is a constant push to take away the identity of the girls in the institution by many means. They forbid them from using their real names. When *Fearless* starts upsetting the system, they take away individuality by giving them all identical uniforms and shaving their heads. *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010) engages the idea of agency through resilience to name calling and theft of one's name in favor of racial slurs or renaming. Clothing, like in *Fearless*, is also used to steal and hide the identity of the women in

Who Fears Death, *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007), and *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011). At some point all of these female protagonists engage in conflict because of what they wear, and it is all connected to the silencing and censorship laws based on religious interpretations by society. The only way that these women discover and challenge these oppressive societies is by engaging their voice in active dialogue against the rhetoric of hiding their bodies.

Who Fears Death (Okorafor, 2010) engages the idea of rape as a thief of identity. Again, names are important. The fact that Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, has her identity stolen because she is raped, and Onyesonwu is marked as an outcast because she was conceived through rape, brings out the stark and terrible truth about how rape steals one's identity and also is often stigmatized by many societies, still placing blame and shame on the victims. Even though Onyesonwu is not accepted because of her father's identity and the fact she was conceived through rape, she learns to regain her identity by overcoming her father's reputation and the names that they call her.

In *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), we have a distinct oppression, and a very organized one at that:

Decades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality -- of humankind's inclination toward evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world's disarray. (p. 42)

Again, in *Divergent* we have a very controlling society that the female must rail against in order to find her identity. There are moments in which the female character engages silly innocuous

stereotypes of women as vapid and vain individuals such as this interaction between Tris and another female character Christine:

“Can you be a girl for a few seconds?”

"I'm always a girl" I frown.

"You know what I mean. Like a silly, annoying girl"

I twirl my hair around my finger. "Kay." (p. 369)

This interaction between these two characters directly acknowledges stereotyping girls and actively uses humor to mock it. There is nothing particularly empowering or beneficial in depicting girls as “hair twirlers” or lacking in depth. This tale shows that both sexes are capable of embracing their emotions and desires in a way that is transparent, in other words, that shows an honest acceptance of themselves.

Further, this use of humor is actually very uncommon in literature and media regarding women. Women are decidedly absent in the humor front it seems. It is as if women do not have the agency or power to mock the system that defines them; at least not as openly and frequently as men do. In *Zoe's Tale* (Scalzi, 2008) we have constant hilarious dialogue that is even more groundbreaking. Using humor consistently to define the female characters and jokesters who have the ability to laugh at themselves breaks some serious gender stereotypes. The females in *Zoe's Tale* are often opinionated, vocal, and challenge the males, even dominate them in conversations; in other words they get the upper hand with wit and humor rather than with emotional expressions like anger or tears. The sort of challenging that happens verbally or even mentally by the women in these books helps in creating an identity via the mouthpiece of the protagonists and other females. Books like *Zoe's Tale* and *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) use humor and uplifting opinions of their gender's mental capacities to solidify the protagonist as a strong

character who is not at the mercy of how the world defines them; it puts the character in a position of power: ‘I know who I am, and what others think is just who they think I am, nothing more, and I’m going to mock stereotypes’. This is perhaps one of the pinnacles of female agency. These moments can be found in media for males in great number but is often overlooked in female-driven novels.

In *Green Witch* (Hoffman, 2009), an acute loss of identity is felt by Green, who needs to discover who she is now that she is no longer in a family unit, which was definitely how she defined herself—by relating herself to her family. This actively engages the idea of family and how it relates to identity. Green discovers that she is more than just part of a family unit but she is a storyteller and a strong individual as she goes on a quest to rescue others. Green creates a new identity through heroism. Green rises above oppressive forces that would like to silence her voice. She even goes as far as to engage other women for their stories, giving them a voice as well. Green is not an object of desire nor is she used by men in this tale. These novels have varying paths to identity and maintaining agency.

Relationships: Defining Female Value

Women in media are stereotypically expected to desire the affections of men or are created as objects of sexual desire. For the purpose of this study, the idea of objectification in literature is rightfully villainized or omitted. While in media outside of literature where the medium is largely visual and often caters to the male gaze—this literature set is able to effectively develop relationships emotionally. Literature is an effective tool for these female characters to establish relational bonds via emotions and helps the process of avoiding objectification and submission via male characters. There is a more implicit role for women in

media artifacts this day and age and it is to act like the female is weak or in need of rescue or a vapid girl who needs to have the attentions of man to feel desired—for there is no better way to implicitly objectify women than to reduce the complexity of their individuality to that of desire. This is evident in the reading that the idea of a woman being two-dimensional and only desiring a relationship has been decidedly challenged in our book set. What these books represent is a more realistic or ‘enlightened’ version of female protagonists. These are female protagonists that have risen above the stereotype of being desired or desiring only companionship. These females embrace complexities of family life, relationships, love, and heroism.

There are many forms of love or forms of relationships in the selected texts. Almost all of these novels exemplify the equality of women in relationships, but the relationships have been split into the major themes and will be analyzed as such. The two categories are love interest and predominant loner. The predominant loner means that the protagonist has, for various reasons, decided to be alone. The ‘love interest’ section essentially establishes how women in these romantic relationships uphold or challenge the ideas of romance. These books do not necessarily have set roles for these categories, but they essentially adhere to them in one form or another. The traditional roles of gender in these books are challenged and deconstructed to develop according to the growth of the characters and not to beliefs on how relationships function between the genders according to society. How these bonds are created are important to female development in being in active communication with their partners.

Relationships: Love Interest

The single love interest is the most explored relationship in novels and arguably the most popular. Romance teen novels are very popular. In these feminist novels, we have many stories

that debunk stereotypes of these relationships. These books deal with real challenges to the couples. The couples in these books face the challenges together as partners, and they have active dialogue in which both the male and female are active listeners rather than one dominating the other. There is a distinct deconstruction of the submissive and dominant gender model for male and female relationships. It is evident that the females in these novels are all strong and possess the idea that they are indeed equal to their male counterparts; thus, they assume a resistant stance to being put in a submissive role. Often in these novels, the submissive female or weak female is the mother figure, or some other female, who serves as the counterweight between the strong main female protagonist and the subservient female (Trites, 1997). The objectified and weak female is important in feminist literature because it helps to make the triumph of the female protagonists all the more obvious and important. This idea is especially relevant in the gendering of how they relate to the opposite sex in romantic relationships.

When She Woke (Jordan, 2011) begins with the trope of “forbidden love” in the category of love interest, but the real challenge to the stereotypical topography of this role for the female is actually challenged by society itself. The society has changed because of the futuristic and dystopic nature of the book, and Hannah’s reaction to the oppression of her love affair is not stereotypical at all. Hannah, instead of remaining in her punishment and accepting it as just, resists and becomes an active pursuer of a new identity by forming other relationships with other females and pursues agency by finding her voice in an oppressive society.

In the case of *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), we have a Tris, a female who sets off on her own. Tris wants to save her family, her friends, and her world against those who have created the restrictive rules for their society. Not only does she imbibe the idea of the strategic and emotionally complex female, but her relationship with the love interest of the story, Tobias, or

Four, is one of equality and not submission. This story incorporates a partnership rather than having one submit to the other:

“You think my first instinct is to protect you. Because you're small, or a girl, or a Stiff. But you're wrong.”

He leans his face close to mine and wraps his fingers around my chin. His hand smells like metal. When was the last time he held a gun, or a knife? My skin tingles at the point of contact, like he's transmitting electricity through his skin.

"My first instinct is to push you until you break, just to see how hard I have to press." he says, his fingers squeezing at the word break. My body tenses at the edge in his voice, so I am coiled as tight as a spring, and I forget to breathe.

His dark eyes lifting to mine, he adds, "But I resist it."

"Why..." I swallow hard. "Why is that your first instinct?"

"Fear doesn't shut you down; it wakes you up. I've seen it. It's fascinating." He releases me but doesn't pull away, his hand grazing my jaw, my neck. "Sometimes I just want to see it again. Want to see you awake." (p. 313)

This interaction and many others break the mold of a damsel in distress model. Tris rescues others and herself throughout the book. She doesn't begin to rely on the protection of Four; rather they are equals and individuals in the relationships. Even when Tris is thinking about Four she admires that he treats her like his equal rather than someone who needs protected: "He is not sweet or gentle or particularly kind. But he is smart and brave, and even though he saved me, he treated me like I was strong. That is all I need to know." (p. 288) This passage is particularly

interesting because it both upholds a stereotype for men while simultaneously challenging one. The fact that Tobias is not “sweet or gentle or particularly kind” is a gender stereotype for men, and the fact that he is “smart and brave” and the idea that Tris desires that in a man, is a stereotypical desire for female. The challenge comes when she talks about him “treating her as strong, even though he had saved her” is challenging the idea of her being damsel-ed, or made out to need rescuing because she is “weak”. Even though Tobias rescues her, he doesn’t act like it’s because she is the weaker sex, only that in that moment she needed help.

Another book in the set that exemplifies the idea of relationship equality and organically does this is *The Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007) in which the female protagonist Ejii meets Dikéogu, and their relationship becomes one built on equality and trust. They both reveal their stories to each other and respect each other’s boundaries. Ejii tells Dikeogu that she “admires him” while taking his hand, and he accepts her gesture (152-159). The relationship they establish is organic and never domineering.

In *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010), we have a male love interest, but Onyesonwu, the female protagonist, is the dominant personality in the relationship, and she is the main focus of the group. She is not submissive, and neither is her love interest Mwita. These two people meet and develop an equal partnership throughout the story. Onyesonwu is deserving of her dominant role, and she is legitimately more suited for the role of leader in their group, but she does not deny Mwita’s council, which is a direct reversal of the submissive woman as council to the male. This reversal is natural and makes sense for organic and equal relationships. The females in these novels are not consumed by romance, and instead, it become a natural addition to their tales and is not their focus.

Relationships: The Loner

The idea of the female loner in these books is different from the traditional ill-tempered individual fighting any sort of companionship thrown their way. These loners are not loners because of choice but because of circumstance. They are loners not only because of a loss of family but in many cases because they are brave and willing to sacrifice themselves to save others. They are not loners because they are emotionally distant but because they care deeply for those they love. There is a difference in the emotional complexity of female loners, and there is more oppression in the female loner subset. The deeper the oppression, the more alone the protagonists find themselves and the more likely the hood of martyrdom. In *Fearless* (Lott, 2007), the little girl Fearless is a prime example of this, and Katniss (Collins, 2008) must sacrifice her safety for her sister. In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu sacrifices her life to save the world. While there is an element of sacrifice or loss to all of these novels, these three books exemplify the idea of females and oppression and why it leads to them protecting and needing to save their traditional and non-traditional or adoptive families.

Instead of being expected to take action like a male protagonist would be expected to, she is expected to fail, or die, or reassume a submissive role. Only through the breaking down of society is the female allowed to assume a role counter to the one expected of her. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), we have a society that leads to an unexpected martyr, Katniss Everdeen, who sacrifices her safety in order to save her sister. The societal order has dictated a different role for women; it has blurred the lines of gender expectations and it is meant to be shocking. In the *Hunger Games*, Katniss is a warrior. She not only breaks the tradition of a female being saved by a lone warrior, she becomes that warrior. She reclaims agency symbolically by sacrificing herself in place of her sister, against the will of the odds. Katniss is the stronger

fighter when compared to Pita. Katniss is smart and often calculates in a fight what her next move will be. These females challenge the traditional and stereotypical feminine role of martyr because they are active in their martyrdom i.e. they choose their fate instead of being dictated as martyrs. It is the idea that these females acquire freedom and heroics through their martyrdom that makes it an exercise in breaking the traditional woman who is rescued or are made martyrs completely against their will. These females break the mold of the ‘innocent’ and ‘helpless’ woman tied to the train tracks.

Institutions: Social Order and Control

In this study I consider the family as the oldest institution that society has created. I think the family or social order is at the base of the female role in these books. Familial institutions in this set of books are an apparent theme that dictates how the female develops her identity and agency. Be it sisterhood, the traditional family, or an adoptive family, all of these females need the family structure to form their quests and the reasons for continuing their journeys. The deconstruction of the family is integral to the challenging of stereotypes in these novels. This deconstruction of family ties via loss, death, separation, or rejection by the family themselves, lead to different discoveries for the female protagonists regarding belonging and identity. All of these books include families that are overtaken or torn apart by various and more powerful institutional entities.

I would argue there is a relevance to the patriarchal make-up of the traditional family and the idea of patriarchal society. The change in family structure directly correlates with the change within institutions of society. The removal of familial bonds in order to deconstruct the stereotypical female model in these novels is clear. The morality of an institution, including

families, directly correlate with familial removal in the storylines of these novels. It is especially necessary for the female protagonist to separate from her family in order to be anew in society. In *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), the institution of the family competes directly with the institutions that control and organize society. Tris had a conflict between choosing her place in society and maintaining her place in her family. As expected, she is removed from her family in order to establish herself as a grown woman; the institutional control of society serves as a vehicle to her discovering her agency and her identity. In *Fearless* (Lott, 2007), the daughter's father is forced to keep his daughter in an institution that he himself runs. Little Fearless is trapped within the institutional control and thus removed from the family where she would have been safe—family institutions must be removed for the female to pursue a counter stereotypical role.

This also directly questions the role of institutions in the organizing of society which females would be skeptical of especially regarding the idea of feminism's constant conflict with governmental control regarding women throughout history; it is still a lingering presence in literature. These novels try and counter that idea with feminine heroics that directly challenge the role of the female as a subservient individual within societies that are in turmoil. A difference here is the idea of females as active pursuers to saving humanity, families, friends, and pursuing meaning for themselves through a journey, rather than the victims of society or the female in need of rescue. Further, the idea of females challenging those that oppress them and embracing danger and fighting for what they believe in is made possible by these novels' creations of controlling institutions that intervene in the traditional familial structure.

Sometimes the gender constructions are more overt than covert in these novels. Instead of a subverted gender role that is understood implicitly, the role of gender is made more explicit. In some of these novels, social order is dictated by the society's explicit enforcement of morality

which in turn constructs gender or deconstructs it. In *Amethyst Road* (Speigler, 2005), there is an active role of government that interferes with Serena's family by taking her little sister away. Societal pressures from Serena's parents' mixed marriage further complicates her role in her society. Institutions are not limited to governmental control, and *Amethyst Road* reinforces that the presence of society and familial bonds can be just as limiting to the growth of a person, in this case to Serena's growth in particular. Serena wants to save her family, but simultaneously she is limited by them as well. She is eventually set free from her family's constant problems via the journey to saving her young sister from her governmental oppressors. Again, there is a clear connection between the interferences of governmental institutions in the familial bonds as a vehicle to the female protagonist's discovery of herself.

Further, morality in some of these novels ties into religious institutions. *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2010) and *Shadow Speaker* (Okorafor-Mbachu, 2007) challenge their world's religion as does Hannah (Jordan, 2011). These females challenge the institutions of gender in their stories. Institutions of gender can be religiously based in gender-restrictive ways, as some of these books use religiously based gender restrictions or gender roles. Sometimes these religious institutions are very patriarchal and harmful to the development of females in these novels.

Sometimes it is governmental control that helps starkly contrast the protagonists' wishes and desires against stereotypical expectations and how society tries to enforce them through law and rule building. The idea of lawful morality is created and destroyed by Hannah's journey to self-discovery in *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011). The author uses governmental and religious institutions to create morality to create the framework for Hannah's reality. The role of women is not changed drastically, but Hannah actively questions her world's philosophy. Everything

that Hannah has been indoctrinated to believe by the institutions that run her life, she begins to challenge through her experiences, and she actively does this through feminism, which encourages agency and self-motivated thought. This book actively challenges preconceived notions of female's proclivity to bear children and whether or not a female role is to indeed to carry through with a pregnancy regardless of the circumstance.

Equality between the genders regarding reproductive matters is questioned in *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011), and it puts the female in a state of individuality regarding those rights. Hannah chooses to enact her own agency by ending her pregnancy. Not including Aidan's agency in the matter is a serious questioning of male gender role in female and male reproductive rights. This shows a silence between the sexes and shows the female as a completely separate entity in a manner that challenges every stereotype for women, and simultaneously challenges the role of humanity in gender construction and in family institutions. This story challenges traditional social order by questioning institutionalized law and the institution's role in the creating of morality through law. Hannah's story also explicitly questions the contemporary role of institutional bodies in our society and if these bodies have a role in dictating the morality for males and females in the decision to end life.

In all of these novels, if there was a social order that maintained strict moral or oppressive law through religious interference in governmental law, there was not a controlling government. If there was a controlling government, there was not a social order that was imposed by the people. This suggests there may be a strong connection between government institutions and the natural development of social ones. Feminism may see government institutions as an enemy that threatens equally to destroy the family and religion as the entity that would destroy the government and female freedom. Social order created by the people and not

an oppressive government was never separate from spirituality in this book set but it was separate from governmental order; and gender roles were explicit. In social order driven books where spirituality was the driving force for social ordering, gender roles were very explicitly established. Governmental control was always connected to technology and social ordering via scientific means and oppressive law and the gender roles remained implicit.

Expectations: Appearance

Many of these stories make a clean break from feminine sexual virtue as something that is a scale of value for women, or they clearly and decidedly challenge it as an expectation for women at all. It is not that virtue is not valuable for females, but that the societal expectation for women to be pure in order to have value is unattainable and thus unrealistic. The idea that women are to be perfect in some way seems to persist throughout time. Today, that value has changed from virtue to sexual prowess and a thin and perfect body. None of these females are perfect, but they are all thin. They all focus on their appearance at some point and have an active dialogue. This dialogue is always self-deprecating, and the female protagonist desires to be more beautiful. This has great implications in the reality for women. It not only establishes feminine beauty as still an active and strictly defined category for women but reestablishes it as something unattainable. It is not the desire for beauty itself, but the inability of these protagonists to accept their own beauty that maintains the value system of beauty for females.

A common theme in any media, and arguably more so with females, is appearance. The vanity of society is oft acknowledged today in our critiques of photo-shopping models and so forth. Literature is not an exception. At one point or another, the females in these books acknowledge their beauty or appearance as being important. None of these female protagonists

call themselves beautiful. It is the idea of self-deprecation or unwillingness to appear vain. Any character that is pretty is made fun of or represented as incredibly vain. There is almost always an acknowledgment of 'true beauty' in all literature. Beauty is to an extent idolized in many cultures. The character must also be relatable to the reader, hardly the average girl relates to the beauty queen. Relationships are often based on the physical appeal of a character. Often in media, and literature negative and limiting roles of female characters are reinforced and these reinforcements are important and relevant to how females view themselves. There is a connection between female heroines and futuristic dystopian societies.

The role of women is constantly under a creative process. Advertising and literature mediums, such as the ones in this study, show how women are viewed and used in many different cultures. I think a notable difference between female protagonists and male protagonists is the idea of appearance and its importance. For females, as heroines, there is an importance to be beautiful, and the value of that is measured constantly versus the male counterpart who is more focused on doing rather than being and appearing. Furthermore, the difference between having both a desire to be and being desirable needs to be balanced in novels in order to create a realistic and feminist character. A woman may be beautiful but she needs to desire to be her own person outside that beauty rather than an object of desire. Although these novels did implicitly and actively comment on beauty the female characters in these novels were required to reject vanity in favor of becoming resourceful and heroic individuals as well.

Tris, from *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) says: "I am small and ugly. No one will ever pick me." (p. 18). Acknowledging her size makes sense here because they are talking about picking teams in a caste that is made of warriors, but ugliness certainly has nothing to do with her being picked or not. It is interesting that even when beauty really is not important within the story, the

character would choose to acknowledge it as a problem. Tris's appearance was constantly on her mind i.e. how thin she was, how small, her perceived ugliness. Tris is very insecure about her appearance, but she comes to accept it, and she accepts her strengths. She says to Peter a fellow dauntless, "People tend to overestimate my character," I say quietly. "They think that because I'm small, or a girl, or a Stiff, I can't possibly be cruel. But they're wrong." (p. 463). Tris's active dialogue explicitly separates her appearance from her identity. In *Birthmarked* (O'Brien, 2010), there is a very clear break with the mold of the 'exceptionally pretty' protagonist. In *Birthmarked*, Gaia focuses on the idea of beauty as more than skin deep and presents a conflicted girl who contemplates the morality of the society in which she lives. Caragh M. O'Brien seems to level the playing field by scarring Gaia with a burn on her face. In a way, it draws attention to the fact that the author may want her character to be admired, not for her beauty, but for her actions; the scar achieves this goal well without becoming the focus.

The *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) is the only dystopian novel that does not have a somewhat constant "stream" of inner reflection on appearance, even though Katniss's appearance is evidently pretty because of Capitol City which becomes a very active commentary. After a strenuous makeover, Katniss and Peeta are taken out to meet the crowds and Katniss thinks "... [I] am floored by how breathtaking we look...Cinna was right about the minimal makeup, we both look more attractive but utterly recognizable" (p. 78). In a way, writing in this chapter seems to mock the idea of appearance as being so focused on, but simultaneously it reinforces its value. Hannah reflects on the idea of appearance and the feminine expectations she once endured. While she is in solitary she realizes, "Her femininity was irrelevant" (Jordan, 2011, p. 7). This idea in itself starkly separates Hannah from the vanity of society. In a sense, it makes the reader aware that these expectations are present—it makes the implicit, explicit—an

important aspect of feminist novels. The idea that female sexuality is an integral part of her value is a razor-thin balance between acknowledging female hardship regarding degradation using female sexuality and finding a foothold in dignity and natural female spirit. The focus on the form of a woman as the defining characteristic of her value does not have to be negative, but often we find that the females in these stories are either degraded by their female sexuality, are ashamed by their sexuality, or think they are ugly, and thus they are not valuable because of it.

The fashion in which the focus of female-driven literature focuses on female sexuality as proving control of that sexuality and a natural acceptance are refreshing and simultaneously helpful to countering negative female imagery and thought-patterns through literature. By dissecting and deconstructing the feminine thought-bubbles in these books we can hope to get a grasp on what drives female characters to either accept or reject their sexuality and what that means on a deeper level. Next, we have the idea that the “ideal” beauty is still emphasized in these books. Whenever the “thin and perfect” ideal is embraced or any ideal that focuses on the beauty or physical attributes as a way for a woman to draw admiration and as synonymous with power, we have a reestablishment of a long-held and negative stereotype. The creation of a girl that is aware of her flaws, besides the ones on her face, actively pursues the idea that females think about themselves in order to create an identity that is separate from their family or their love-lives. Whenever a protagonist talks about their weakness in a sense of perception that is their own, they then can acknowledge ways to overcome those weaknesses, which is the pathway to acquiring strength and thus agency. When authors take the focus off the characters’ appearance and they focus on actions instead, this makes the characters’ agency all the more real because it is the focus of the reader’s gaze.

Femininity is not necessarily adhering to physical weakness, and being a strong fighter

is not necessarily un-feminine. Tris, in *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), accepts strength as part of her identity and not as a separate masculine trait, imposing the idea that women can be physically and mentally strong without crossing a “boundary”. Also, female traits are not something to be covered up and challenged but embraced if they are a part of your character. Gender stereotyping often forces a person to imitate behavior consciously, rather than assist the protagonists in and embrace their identity, and in many cases embracing the identity for these protagonists is what leads to them to obtaining agency. Often the protagonists in these books must actively resist being defined by their societies simply by their femininity and further resist ideas, models, and societal expectations of beauty that are unattainable.

Conclusions and Implications

This study revealed the connecting themes prevalent in this feminist novel set. I discovered a clear connection between the idea of deconstructing familial bonds in order to unlock the female protagonists’ individuality. More specifically, the father and male presence is removed in one form or another. There is also a clear connection of negating male dominance by means of omission of male presence and voice. The idea that gender dictates the role of an individual was also very prevalent in the social order category which often featured traditional social morals and laws as the force that dictated the roles of women, often in the form of religion, society, and government institutions. The institution categories where the interference and control of governmental institutions, as the enemy to all, unified the female protagonists to her male counterparts more often than not against a common enemy. The constant presence of a preoccupation on female sexuality and appearance as important to her identity were in all books in some form. The idea of beauty remained an important aspect of the feminine psyche. Often the opinion of their appearance was negative, and the protagonist was never obese. The roles of

these thematic codes in these books are interwoven and elaborately entwined in the female protagonists' road to individuality and to reestablishing order.

Gender studies is an incredibly vast subject matter, and the literature component of it is not different. Engaging literature and cultural media is an important pursuit in order to analyze how gender is created in society via media and to actively explore it. I think the themes develop under the philosophies in these novels in ways that are increasingly complex and that include the idea that females do not need to adhere to stereotypically submissive roles. In many cases, these novels portray, support, and challenge female roles and issues when they deal with gender. I hope that this work will inspire others to consider implicit and explicit implications of gender within literature mediums and within the extension of society itself. I hope it will inspire feminists to think about females, gender roles, and the philosophies that drive gender creation in literature mediums and society. Nothing should be left unchallenged or unexplored when it comes to human potential.

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Appendix A: Summaries

When She Woke

In an oppressive and dystopic world, a girl named Hannah struggles to overcome the trials and tribulations after she has an illegal abortion. She struggles to attain agency and identity after being marked by her society for her crime.

Green Witch

Green is a girl that lost her entire family to the oppressive and destructive regime. She goes around searching for the stories of other women in order to maintain the identity of her society, and she discovers her voice along the way.

The Secret Under my Skin

In this futuristic novel, an event called the “technocaust” has left a large generation of orphans. Blake Raintree goes on a journey of self-discovery and belonging.

Hunger Games

An authoritarian government has its people controlled by fear. Katniss Everdeen has volunteered as tribute in place of her little sister who was selected first to compete in a game of chance.

Birthmarked

Gaia, purposefully marked from birth to spare her being taken from her family, now works with her mother sending babies to the Enclave. The Enclave is an evil purist organization, and Gaia goes on a journey of self-empowerment in order to save her parents after they are arrested.

Libyrrinth

Haly works with her friends to stop a group called the “Eradicants” from destroying a mythical book called the ‘Book of The Night’. Haly works to reconcile with a boy when she is taken captive by the Eradicants.

The Amethyst Road

Serena and her older sister Willow are half Yulang and half Gorgio, and neither race accepts them. After Zara is taken by the Gorgio, Serena is launched into a journey to get her back and perhaps reach out to her estranged mother.

Stolen Voices

Miri, is a “talentless” girl in her society of Novaskina. She goes on a quest to discover her talent and instead uncovers a dark secret.

Who Fears Death

In a post-apocalyptic world, Onyesonwu, a daughter of rape, turns out to be a very talented sorceress. She makes friends, finds love, and along the way rewrites the fate of the world.

For the Win

Online gaming gives us a global awareness of multiple different youngsters trying to make it big in the gaming universe.

Zoe’s Tale

Zoe and her family are important players in an intergalactic chess game between the human Colonial Union and the Colonial Union’s desire to draw an alien alliance into war. Zoe is called to be a hero to her entire colony and has to grow up fast and use all of her resources and resolve to save all that she loves.

The Girl in the Arena

In a contemporary gladiator society, teenage Lyn is trying to discover what exactly she is supposed to do after the loss of her father.

The Shadow Speaker

Ejii, a girl with great talent, must try to reclaim her identity from her violent father’s legacy while she struggles to master her powers in order to save this post-apocalyptic world from a global war.

Divergent

Institutions, order, and
of a young girl name
overcome the evil regime
by dividing people into

Relationships	LI (Love Interest) L (Loner)
Institutions	CGT (Controlling Government) SO (Social Order)
Feminine Expectations	Appearance (A)
Loss	Death/Absence of Father (DAOF) Agency/Identity (AI)

fear control the society
Tris. She struggles to
that controls the society
distinctive classes.

Fearless

A little girl named Fearless tries to make those outside aware that the institution called the City
Community Faith School is actually a place of abuse and not a place of rehabilitation as it
claims.

Appendix B:

	Relationships		Loss		Institutions		Female Expectations
	LI	L	DOAF	AI	SO	CGT	A
When She Woke (2011)	x		x	x	x		x
Divergent (2011)	x		x	x		x	x
For the Win (2010)		x	x	x	x		x
Girl in the Arena (2009)	x		x	x	x		x
Green Witch (2010)	x		x	x		x	x

Libyrrinth (2009)		x	x		x		x
Who Fears Death (2010)	x	x	x	x	x		x
Birthmarked (2010)	x		x	x		x	x
The Hunger Games (2008)	x		x	x		x	x
The Shadow Speaker (2007)	x		x	x	x		x
Fearless (2007)		x	x	x		x	x
Stolen Voices (2005)	x		x	x		x	x
The Amethyst Road (2005)	x		x	x	x		x
The Secret Under my Skin (2005)		x	x	x		x	x
Zoe's Tale (2008)	x		x		x		x